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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the power that qualitative researchers can hold in how participants perceive, structure, and interpret experiences, particularly through interviews. Examples from a pilot study illustrate how the author influenced participants' views, interpretations, and constructions of the text of the interviews. This paper also presents a research approach that emerged out of a second study in which the interviewer attempted to negotiate influence on how participants reported what was significant. The strategy of giving each participant a microcassette recorder and a disposable camera to depict the essence of their experiences produced a greater understanding of the curricular nature of short-term, cross-cultural service projects than the traditional research methods of the first study. (Contains 67 references.) (Author/RS)

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RUNNING HEAD: How I see it: Negotiating researcher power

ED 478 456

How I see it: Negotiating researcher power on the structures of experience

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the power that the qualitative researchers can hold in how participants perceive, structure, and interpret experiences, particularly through interviews. I cite examples from a pilot study that illustrate how I influenced participants' views and interpretations and constructions of the text of the interviews. The purpose of this paper is to present a research approach that emerged out of the second study as I attempted to negotiate my influence on how participants reported what was significant. The strategy of giving each participant a microcassette recorder and a disposable camera to depict the essence of their experiences produced a greater understanding of the curricular nature of short-term, cross-cultural service projects than the traditional research methods of the first study.

How I see it: Negotiating researcher power on the structures of experience

A foundational objective for qualitative researchers is to transform the complexities of life (Atkinson, 1992) into textual forms that accurately represent the perspectives, frameworks, or analyses of the actors. For researchers who attempt to capture the essence of the experiences as they are lived and interpreted by participants (van Manen, 1990), this transformational process can be particularly daunting. This task often is frustrated further when the researcher's presence, through participant observation or interviews, shapes the participants' experiences in markedly different ways from what they would have experienced if the researcher were absent.

Novice researchers generally enter the field employing methods of direct observation, interviews, and analysis of documents (Patton, 2002), attempting to collect data that converts the field into text (Atkinson, 1992). The meanings that participants ascribe to events, actions, and situations (Maxwell, 1996) emerge as researchers build relationships with the participants in a collaboration of discovery, producing what Andrea Fontana and James Frey describe as "negotiated, contextually based results" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). The awareness of the social process between researcher and participants has prompted some to call those who participate in studies "coresearchers" (Huber & Clandinin, 2002) to purposefully represent the nature of the relationship between researcher(s) and participants and the research process overall.

Conversely, others seem to demonstrate a lack of awareness of the social influence on the data produced through the research process. Hall and Callery, in their discussion about the social processes associated with grounded theory methodology, observe:

> Some proponents of the grounded theory method appear to treat interview and participant observation data as though they mirror informants' realities … Grounded theorists, with

> their focus on inherent procedures for verification of data (Kvale, 1995), appear to have given little attention to the social processes that influence the generation of data and thus the social construction of knowledge. (Hall & Callery, 2001, p. 257).

The influence of the social process involved in data collection, specifically interviews, became the emergent dilemma in my attempt to capture the way in which adolescents experienced a short-term, cross-cultural service project. Because these youth programs are relatively understudied, I wanted to capture the emic perspectives of the participants, focusing on how students interpreted them (van Manen, 1990). With the gaps of understanding still present concerning short-term service projects, I wanted to discover and develop theory about the trips as curriculum. Why do the participants deem these trips as significant when the results are difficult to measure, the observable effects apparently short-lived, and the constructs of the trips pedagogically questionable? Specifically, what is the nature of the curriculum for participants?

What surfaced from a pilot study was that my traditional approaches to data collection impeded my ability to understand the trips as the students perceived them. Focusing on four North American high school students, I had implemented regular interviews and direct observation as they participated in the trip's service work with two foundations (social agencies) that worked with abandoned young people and local orphanages. As I conducted the follow-up interviews a few months after the trip, it became apparent that for two of the students, the research process had changed the nature in which they had experienced the trip and its encounters. My presence and perspectives had introduced a different way of experiencing the trip to the students. I wanted to negotiate this "power" and conduct a study that allowed students to interpret and structure their experiences in ways that was as free from my influence as possible.

Qualitative researchers can never eliminate the effect they have in a research setting (Maxwell, 1996), but the interaction between researcher and participant can shape the way in which the participants think about, structure, and interpret lived experiences in significantly different ways than if the researcher were not present. In this paper, I will present a research approach that emerged out of the second of two studies of North American high school students participating on short-term, cross-cultural service projects. While issues of power are generally discussed in relation to the writing of research, I found that I needed to be conscious of issues of power in how data were constructed and collected. The strategy of giving each participant a microcassette recorder and a disposable camera to depict the essence of their experiences produced a greater understanding of the curricular nature of short-term, cross-cultural service projects.

Cross-cultural service projects

Cross-cultural service projects have emerged as popular programs for North American high school students. Over 400 agencies, a majority of them from religious backgrounds, coordinate and lead short-term service projects (Millham, 1988; Nah, 2000). Conservative estimates suggest that nearly 250,000 middle school and high school students will spend about 100 million dollars in 2003 to participate in these programs. The growth of these programs has been described as a "fad" (Edmondson, 2001), a "boom" (Anthony, 1994; Mathews, 1992), and a "phenomenon" (Corwin, 2000). Different from service-learning efforts, which schools usually superintend and always include a formal classroom experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999), these cross-cultural service projects[1] are most often facilitated by non-governmental organizations (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1997; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Non-profit charities (e.g., Cross-Cultural Solutions, CARE, Breakthroughs

Abroad, Habitat for Humanity), churches, and local community groups offer high school students opportunities to serve in another culture, most often in a country described as part of the "developing world" (Scott, 1999).

For the participating students, the promises of journeying into new cultures, the prospects of learning more about themselves, the chances to make a difference in the world, and the opportunities to grow in their religious faith make these events particularly alluring. These promises are distinctive in a culture of narcissistic consumerism, struggle for identity formation, and pressure to conform to imposed ideals and images (Heilman, 1998; hooks, 2000; Lasch, 1991; Rushkoff, 2001; Schultze, Anker, Zuidervaart, & Worst, 1990; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). However, the short duration of these tourist-like experiences, the difficulties associated with cross-cultural understanding, and the uncertainties of who benefits from these experiences have caused some observers to question their value (Bochner, 1982; Edmondson, 2001; Nah, 2000; Pearce, 1982; Perkins & Carrasco, 2002; Slimbach, 2000).

There is a limited amount of research focused on informal cross-cultural service projects, mostly because they operate outside of the scope of research of the service-learning community, which focuses on school-based service efforts. Quantitative studies (Jones, 1998; Manitsas, 2000; Tuttle, 2000) have failed to show any significant effects from these trips, while a study that did find a significant effect size (Beers, 2001) essentially ignored it and chose to discuss other issues. Three noteworthy qualitative studies (Beckwith, 1991; Kim, 2001; Mabry, 2000) have been helpful in detailing short-term experiences from various perspectives, but lack rigor in theoretical orientation to the data and textual analysis that foster a depth of how participants interact with the experiences. While participants report these experiences to be significant, the

limited research and the voices that question the value of these experiences paint a different picture.

Researcher power

The researcher can be a formidable force in the construction and depiction of knowledge through research, both qualitative and quantitative. The researcher is the highest authority (Massey, 1998) in selecting what is in the final account and through whom we gaze on the area of study (Atkinson, 1992). For an account to be credible, Massey observes that the researcher's power in ethnographic studies must be tempered so that readers feel that the culture has been illuminated rather than obscured behind the researcher's idiosyncrasies (1998). For researchers interested in a phenomenological understanding of the experience, readers must be confident that the structural themes that emerge are constructed by the participants versus the researcher and his or her prior experiences and perspectives.

Joseph Maxwell notes that researchers may be "smuggling unexamined assumptions into the research questions themselves, imposing a conceptual framework that doesn't fit the reality you're studying" (1996, p. 51). He explains, "The influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied, a problem generally known as *reactivity*, is a second problem that is often raised about qualitative studies .... The goal in a qualitative study is not to eliminate this influence but to understand it and use it productively" (p. 91).

To foster understanding about their influence, researchers often engage in reflexivity, a process that Michael Quinn Patton notes has gained in prominence as researchers have become aware that they need to examine what they know and how they know it (Patton, 2002, p. 64). This reflexive practice of examining ones biases and values, however, does not effectively address issues of researcher power in situations where the relationship between researcher and

participant is that of coresearchers. As the co-construction of the representations of experience proceed, the presence, personality, and prior knowledge of the researcher informs the representations. As the researcher clarifies, asks for details and/or explanations, and reacts to nonverbal movements, he or she shapes the interview through these interpretive efforts (Hall & Callery, 2001; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

Narrative researchers have noted the tensions and weaknesses of structured interviews. Rather than producing a depth of representation, the question-and-answer exchanges can produce a fragmented construction of how participants feel and think about the area of study (Riessman, 1993). The purpose of my research was not to elicit personal narratives that would be analyzed for formal structures and properties (Labov, 1982; Riessman, 1993). Rather, I wanted to allow students to think, experience, and interpret the experiences as they conceived them. I wanted to conduct a thematic analysis and understand what the phenomenological themes that Max van Manen calls "structures of experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79).

While this discussion of researcher power does not include issues of political power in representations of participants, I want to acknowledge that it is an important aspect of the relationships between researcher and the actors. For example, a major concern of those organizing health research of Indigenous people in Australia was that the research was being conducted solely to further the academic ambitions of non-Indigenous researchers rather than benefiting the Indigenous participants (Tsey, 2001, p. 21). Who benefits from the research and how the actors are portrayed in the writing of research are issues of power that are beyond the scope of this paper, but are important components in understanding the scope of researcher power.

Perhaps it was through a reflexive awareness on issues of power that I became mindful that my perspective, influenced by my doctoral studies, had shaped the ways that students thought about their experiences on a short-term, cross-cultural service project to Romania. Despite using open-ended questions and allowing students to interpret their experiences with a great amount of freedom, the research relationship I had created with the students structured how they talked about their experiences. The content of the questions asked, as well as the null content of the questions not asked, delineated a narrow range of potential responses, creating a bounded field within which students were free to answer, but only in ways that I perceived to be relevant to the stories of their experiences.

A powerful presence

In an effort to capture the essence of why participants deem these trips as significant, yet researchers have been slow to discover, I took a phenomenological perspective in my methodology. I wanted an "insider" perspective on these trips, so I accompanied four high school students on a short-term service project to Iasi, Romania in the summer of 2000. The four were part of a larger group of 19 adults and students from the Midwest who spent 10 days working for two different social agencies. The group went to Iasi to bring much-needed medicine and aid for a home an assisted living institution, an orphanage that usually gets overlooked by most other visiting groups, and a hospital for children with AIDS. The group also focused their efforts on assisting another foundation that worked with children who had been abandoned, families who had been displaced from their homes for various reasons, and older teenagers who were living on the streets and in parks.

Each evening during the trip, I conducted daily interpretive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) with the four students, using structured and semi-structured questions in both individual

interviews and interviews with all four students. The one-on-one interviews allowed each student to interpret the experiences without the influence of the other students and share stories that held particularly personal meaning. The group interviews allowed for a consensus of emerging themes among the students and immediate member confirmation or clarification of specific issues from the trip. After the trip had concluded, I interviewed each student a month after his or her return, and finished with a group interview a month later.

The format for interviews was a series of seven questions that provided a framework to discuss the trip's experiences and allow the students to comment on them as we reflected on each day. The presence of a researcher on the trip and the focus on the daily incidents began to shape how students viewed the service project. They were examining and ascribing meaning to events that they normally would assign because there was a specific listener interested in their story (Riessman, 1993). The focus was on each day's experiences, not on how they were interpreting the trip. They were unable to tell the story as they perceived it because I was focusing the questions from a curricular perspective, particularly that of experiential education (Dewey, 1938), while they were approaching it with existential and spiritual perspectives (Bilsker, 1992; Evans, 1984; Heidegger, 1962; Solomon, 1974).

The students began to question their experiences, and a critical perspective emerged from the relationship between researcher and participants. Because of my studies in multicultural education and my awareness of the nature of these short-term trips, it was difficult to not insert a leading question. On one occasion I asked, "How do you feel about doing this trip in front of the Romanians, the ones that we don't come in contact with, as they just stand and watch you?" This introduced a new framework for the students who, until that point, had not noticed that there were many people we were not encountering. The students were simply attempting to acclimate

to their host culture, focusing primarily on those translators and representatives who hosted them instead of being conscious of the larger cultural context.

As Maria[2], one of the students, departed for the trip, she was approaching it as an opportunity to explore more about her identity. She explained to me:

> I'm excited. I am excited about the whole thing. Everyone who has been to Romania before has talked to me about stuff and just how amazing it's going to be. I just have a feeling that something I'll see or something I'll do will change how I look at stuff, and I don't know what it's going to be yet.

As the trip progressed and we discussed the experiences of each day, Maria began to take more of a critical approach, examining each experience not for the meaning it had to her, but evaluating it in light of some "ideal" for what they should be doing. She reflected on the trip:

> Coming in, I don't know, in a lot of situations we didn't spend much time, and it kind of felt like we just breezed in you know, and breezed out and saw what we saw and then left. In a way it might have seemed like we presumed that … I don't know. It's hard to explain. It's part of cross-cultural experiences, I think … I'm not saying that everything we did was presumptuous, but saying people might have seen it that way.

It is admittedly difficult to demonstrate or "prove" my researcher influence, but the way in which the interviews progressed produced significant questions regarding the validity of the accounts of Maria and her companions. This threat of interpretation was not only that I was imposing my perspective on the representation of the interview, but also that the interview process had shaped how students made sense of these personal and varied experiences. Even through the use of member checks, the students confirmed the truthfulness of the statements and clarified other statements, but were unable to reframe how they viewed the experiences. I had

determined the boundaries of the field of experiences through the focus of the interviews and my perspective (Atkinson, 1992).

The first study functioned in helpful ways by uncovering methodological and theoretical problems with phenomenological research on these youth programs. Maxwell notes that a pilot study can be helpful in discovering the "meaning that these phenomena and events have for the actors who are involved in them" (1996, p. 45). (Indeed, the autobiographical nature of the experiences pivoted on themes that often had little to do with the acts of service in which the students engaged.) I completed the study knowing that I wanted to capture the "essence" of these experiences and still be a direct observer of the trip, but I needed a different methodology that allowed students to construct narratives about their experiences as they desired.

A different story

The second study focused on a youth ministry group from a large church in the Midwest. A group of ten high school students and two adult leaders traveled to Ecuador to assist a group of local churches there. The group helped build an orphanage for a local church, conducted a community program for children from the areas around the churches, and visited two area high schools. I selected this particular youth ministry program because they are a model of how most trips are coordinated and conducted, they allowed me complete access to all functions and communications, and I had no previous contact with them so I possessed no power, authority, or prior relationship with the group's participants or leaders.

In an attempt to capture the autobiographical nature of the experience for the ten high school students, I gave each student a microcassette recorder and a disposable camera at a pre-trip meeting. I instructed the students to record what they were experiencing on their tape

recorders and taking pictures. I told them to describe, record, and explain what was significant or meaningful as they went through the trip and its experiences.

There were no further instructions. From that point on, I was a full participant in the experiences of this group. The leaders of the service project gave me the role of "trip photographer," though the students were fully aware of my research purposes and had signed the university's consent forms to participate in the study. The photographs I took (over 1,400) and my written field notes composed an intricate understanding of the trip and experiences from my perspective. I did occasionally remind students about the tape recorders, saying that I wanted to know what it was like to be "them" going through the trip. Most students, however, did not need this coaching in talking about the trip. They enjoyed using the tape recorders, found them easy to use, and remarked that the process was helpful in reflecting on the events of each day as well as the overall experience.

The amount and type of data from this approach is wide and varied, yet rich with anecdotes (van Manen, 1990). Because of the limited time each evening to debrief and the breadth of my focus (ten students), this approach allowed me to collect more data than if I were conducting thirty-minute interviews each day. Moreover, the tape recorders provided my best attempt to capture the experiences of these trips "as lived." Students carried their microcassette recorders around during the day on the trip, making brief comments as they had opportunities. Some would spend 15 minutes alone each night documenting, describing, and interpreting their experiences that day. Two students chose to write about their experiences instead of using the tape recorders. One of these students wrote over 100 pages of notes about the trip in a journal.

All but three of the students recorded at least two tapes' full of recorded data. Two students chose to write about their experiences instead of talking into the recorders, and one

student recorded only about 20 minutes of audio during the trip. In all, the students' interpretations filled 19 hours' worth of tapes. All tapes (including the ten tapes of recorded field notes and memos that I recorded) were transcribed and analyzed for themes that structured, or gave meaning to, the students' experiences.

After the trip, I held a series of interviews with each of the students, focusing on the themes that emerged from the analysis. The students clarified any confusions, expanded on the meanings, and added to my understanding of what they experienced and learned. The students also talked about what they had been recording on their tape recorders since the trip's completion. I let them keep tape recorders after the trip to record what they noticed about their thoughts and actions. However, at the final group interview in October, only four students turned in tapes, totaling about two hours of recorded data in that four-month span.

A different voice

Avner Segall, in his discussion of critical ethnography, notes, "Writing is never for itself; it is always both *about* and *for* somebody, something, somewhere, sometime … else. And whether writing is conducted while Being There or Being Here, it is never natural, unbiased, or disinterested; never simply 'writing down'" (Segall, 2001, p. 582). The same held true for the audio recordings of the students on the trip. There remained a social process to the construction of these texts on the tape recorders (Mishler, 1991). Even with the "freedom" to interpret their experiences as they desired, students visualized someone to whom they were talking. Some addressed me as their audio audience; others talked to themselves or their family. One student would frequently make a "note to self," one student occasionally talked to God, and some students talked to "Nancy," the person they had discovered, though they did not know her, would transcribe their depictions.

Even so, the accounts of the students on the second trip were significantly different in focus and quality from the interviews of the first trip. The students were able to tell the story of the trip as they wanted to structure it, even if I as the researcher remained the audience. The short-term trip suspended the ongoing narrative of the students' lives, allowing students to question their identity by asking, "Am I authentic?" This question surfaces differently from student to student, but appeared when students asked questions like, "Do I feel deeply about the poor?" "Do I have a heart for the things of God?" or, "Does my future align with who I think I am?" Students were participating on this trip as a means of identity exploration.

When Amy, a senior in high school, was packing to leave, she paused to record her reasons for going on the trip:

> Another fear that I have about Ecuador is that I'm gonna come back, and will just be like every other youth trip that I've ever been on. Nothing's really gonna change. And I'm so sick of that. It totally sucks because I hate it. Everybody always winds up with these huge, life-changing experiences, and I can never really tell the difference … It's so frustrating because it seems like every time I come back, I'm just the same. And I really hope that this trip's different, and I want it to be different. I want it to be special, and I keep on praying that God will just mold my heart. So hopefully that'll happen. I mean, otherwise, if this doesn't happen – if I'm not a totally different person when I come back – what a waste of time and what a waste of money, and what a waste of, like, everything. Like, I have to come back a different person this time. I have to come back changed. Otherwise, what's the point? I've been on so many trips.

This methodology allowed the students to specify the ways in which the social dynamics influenced the trip beyond what I could observe. One of the most significant dilemmas of the trip

was a high level of conflict among the female students. As Ellen prepared to leave on the trip, she detailed the relationships among the ten students, wondering if she fit in or not. She concluded, "I feel like that I should just not even be here, and nobody would care if I was here or not. So, I just kind of want to get sick so I can just stay here and nobody will care. It's just really frustrating."

Ellen's story illustrates the way in which she was able to describe the curricular nature of the trip, an autobiographical curriculum that Pinar and Grumet name *currere*. As the experiences, structured and otherwise, are encountered, "*Currere* seeks to understand the contribution [they make] to one's understanding of his or her own life" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 20). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman define *currere* as that which "focuses on the educational experience of the individual, as reported by the individual" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 414). Pinar and Grumet clarify, "The thesis of our dialectic is: I don't know, and I must study and search. I must be open to my experience, open to others', and be willing to abandon what I think in the face of what I see" (1976, p. viii).

Ellen came on the trip with that explicit purpose. Fighting her desire to stay home because she did not fit in with the group, she wanted to go on the trip to see how she would feel and respond to the situations presented to her and explore her feelings about her future vocation. She was willing to abandon her occupational dream, and did so, as she came face-to-face with the children. Three months after the trip, she transferred to a different college to begin a major in counseling. She decided on the trip to become an advocate for children who experience social and emotional difficulties, something she experienced in her childhood and early adolescence.

Two encounters for the students illustrate the way in which the students were able to interpret their experiences as they desired. In each case, once a "text" was created about the

experience, the interpretations and descriptions remained constant realities that were stuck in time. The first encounter was the resolution of the conflict between Ellen and the rest of the group. On Thursday, the next-to-last night of the trip, Ellen was crying during the evening meeting. She had been antagonistic during the previous two days, but now she was overcome and the group of students gathered around her. There were a series of hugs, punctuated by laughter among the students and the two adult leaders. However, there were no apologies and no discussions about the conflict that had plagued the group all week. The students were happy, joyful, and glad that the clash would not affect their experiences for the remaining three days. Everyone appeared willing to walk away from the skirmish.

The incongruity was that the issues associated with the conflict remained, and it continued for weeks after the trip, despite the depictions that it was resolved. On that particular Thursday night, the euphoria of unity had been interpreted as what was important to the students. In the post-trip interviews, students admitted that the conflict had not been resolved, but the story of the trip continues that it had been resolved, that Thursday night was a significant part of their experiences.

The second encounter illustrates the nature in which students make meaning from their experiences. The students perceived the people they encountered as happier and more content with their lives despite living in poverty. They noted that the people in Ecuador possessed a "great joy" that they lacked in their own lives as Americans. They arrived at this through observing the smiles and nods that they received as they met people on the streets, at church, and at restaurants. The misinterpretation of nonverbal gestures is common in cross-cultural interactions (Bennett, 1990; Poyatos, 1988; Southworth, 1999), yet for these students the apparent happiness of their hosts confronted their own consumeristic values (Belk, 1985;

Richins, 1987; Swinyard, Kau, & Phua, 2001). The students had little or no awareness of the oppression and effects of poverty (Bradshaw, 2002; Lyman, 2002), no time to bridge the language barrier to hear the actual stories of those who smiled at them, but the interpretations of the gestures of hospitality were significant parts of their experiences.

In a post-trip interview, I asked John about his repeated comments about how happy the people were. He responded:

> I think what we see down there, whether it's true or not, it's a good thing. It's good to be content with what little you have than not to be content with all that we have. And so, whether or not it's true down there, it doesn't really matter. You know, I hope they are [happy] but I think, you know, the change that happens in your own life [from this trip], that's a true experience, and I think that's a good experience. And I think that's one thing that happens from an event like that or some experience like that. You bring it home. You change your life, and it really doesn't matter whether it was true or not as much as you might have originally thought. It changed your life, and then you may find out a year or two later – you may go down there for a couple years – and you may find altogether that it's completely not true, that, you know, really they are just as discontent with the things they have as we are. But you have already had, I think, a change in your life. A change in your perspective of things that it really doesn't matter so much.

As I compare the stories and themes between the two trips, I think it would have been difficult to capture the existential qualities of the pursuit of a new identity, the "resolution" of conflict, and the constructed meaning made of nonverbal gestures if I had been interviewing students each night. While the themes may have been present through an interview format, the second study effectively revealed the multi-dimensional and multi-layered ways (van Manen,

1990) in which students conducted their identity pursuits. Despite the researcher still serving as the primary audience, the students controlled the depictions of what they discussed, determined when and how they would talk about their experiences, and connected their histories and futures into their narratives.

Conclusions

Researchers who desire to capture the essence of lived experiences need to be conscious of the power they hold in how data is constructed and collected with participants. Because what is said in an interview is always "a function of the interviewer and the interview situation" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 91), the ways in which participants depict, structure, and limit their interpretations can be significantly different from how the essence of that lived experience would be if the researcher were absent. This was particularly true in the depictions of how North American high school students interacted with their experiences of a short-term, cross-cultural service project. The strategy of giving each participant a microcassette recorder and a disposable camera to depict the essence of their experiences produced a greater understanding of the curricular nature of short-term, cross-cultural service projects than traditional research methods in a previous study.

Focusing on each student's own perspective and interpretation allowed the students to have a voice about what was significant and important on the trip. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin quote Deborah Britzman's (1989) explanation of voice as the:

> Meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community... The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else...Voice suggest relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual's

> relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

When I began interviewing the students at the completion of the second trip, I could sense a "shift" in how I was learning about their experiences. No longer was I listening to the author explain their experiences to his or her audience, but a new voice had entered in the story as I asked questions and sought clarification. No story is without an audience, as Segall (2001) and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have shown, but I wanted to attempt to not author the story. Margaret Olson, as quoted in Huber and Clandinin (2002), writes:

> We can begin to think about how we each author our own life. I understand authorship to be the narrative expression of a person's agency and intentionality as he or she constructs meaning through experience ... Authoring is a complex process. This complexity becomes obvious when we consider each person as the author of his/her own life, a life which is continually in interaction with others authoring their lives. (Olson, 1993, p. 24).

In negotiating how we see these cross-cultural experiences, and through whose eyes the significant meanings are constructed, I feel I have reached a greater understanding of what happens to students and why it has been difficult for other researchers to "measure." When I have discussed my initial understandings with those who have gone on similar trips, I sometimes notice a twinkle in an eye or a slight smile and raise of an eyebrow that seems to suggest I have also understood the essence of *their* experiences. While not a formal test of validity, perhaps this is the truest measurement of whether I have begun the journey to understand the essential nature of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

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Footnotes

[1] Some groups call them "short-term mission trips" because they are rooted in the missionary efforts of various churches. I am choosing here to use the phrase "service projects" to include all trips that travel abroad to serve in various capacities.

[2] All names are pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity.

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